

# CLARA GROSSMAN



The Hercz Family of Nyirbator, Hungary, was Orthodox. On Shabbat and holidays, Armin Hercz wore a shtreimel, a fur-trimmed Hasidic hat. His wife, Ann Hercz, put out a white damask tablecloth and fine china. Gathered around were children, sick relatives living with the family and others in need of hospitality.

On Fridays, daughter Clara walked to town to fill a decanter with kosher wine and deliver the cholent to the community oven for the next day's meal. Clara, born Klari in 1930, was the second of four children. She loved the freshly prepared gefilte fish, challah, chicken soup, homemade noodles, and roast chicken, duck or goose and liver paté that graced the Sabbath table. Still, at times, she resisted the limitations of Orthodoxy. "I was angry about wearing long hose and long-sleeved dresses in the summertime," she says. "Even as a young child, I said I would never marry anyone someone picks out for me."

Her father, Armin Hercz, bought raw chemicals from farmers, processed them in his warehouse and shipped them around the world. As a youngster, Clara remembers moving into a large house with rugs, gardens and two servants. Ann Hercz and the children spent summers at a mountain resort.

The boys rose at 5 a.m. to attend cheder, Hebrew school. Clara attended a Jewish school after fifth grade, when the public school no longer permitted Jewish pupils.

The Herczes were among about 1,800 Jews in Nyirbator, a town of about 20,000. There were three synagogues. The Jews and gentiles of Nyirbator interacted superficially. "Life was good because our families were so close and we made our own lives," Clara says, "but there was always a feeling of uneasiness."

The Nazis invaded in March 1944. The Herczes were deported to a ghetto in April and a month later to Auschwitz. Selected for work, Clara escaped at war's end from a forced march.

An orphan at 15, she made her way back to Nyirbator and later to a displaced persons camp in Germany. U.S. immigration quotas prevented her from leaving until April 1948.

Once in the United States, Clara lived with cousins in Hazelton, Pennsylvania. After high school, she worked in her cousin's bank while taking university courses at night. Clara was introduced to the man she married at a family wedding. Uncle Cal, who had worked hard for her freedom, gave her away.

Clara owned a ladies' boutique, sold wedding clothes and arranged corporate meetings before retiring to make time for travel and volunteering. She and Ruvane "Rip" Grossman, originally transferred to Kansas City by Marion Laboratories, have three married daughters and eight grandchildren. They are members of Temple B'nai Jehudah.

Says Clara, "I am Hungarian by birth and Jewish by religion, but American because this is where they opened their doors and gave me a home."



Portrait by Gloria Baker Feinstein

Excerpt from *From the Heart: Life Before and After the Holocaust ~ A Mosaic of Memories*

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